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ABSTRACT

This issue brief discusses the benefits of mentoring for youth with disabilities and strategies for encouraging mentoring. It begins by discussing research that has demonstrated the effectiveness of mentoring and different types of mentoring, including a new model of electronic mentoring that is increasing in popularity. A chart shows how mentoring programs can be made more accessible for youth with disabilities and recommendations are provided for encouraging inclusion of youth with disabilities in mentoring programs. Key strategies for creating mentoring programs that include youth with disabilities are explained and include: (1) establish a clear structure, be careful about handling the discourse of disability-related information, and systematically use accommodations; (2) support youth in understanding and discussing their disabilities by being open to discussion of disabilities in the mentoring relationship; (3) support mentors by periodically communicating with them about the progress or challenges in the mentoring process; (4) assure that the mentoring program is set up to support and facilitate regular, ongoing communication between mentors and proteges; (5) build into the mentoring program an adequate means of screening mentors; and (6) require parents to sign a consent form giving permission to the youth to participate in the program. (CR)

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NCSET Issue Brief

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Issue Brief

Examining Current Challenges in Secondary Education and Transition

National Center on Secondary Education and Transition

Creating Opportunities for Youth With Disabilities to Achieve Successful Futures

A partnership of —

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Creating Mentoring Opportunities for Youth with Disabilities: Issues and Suggested Strategies

By Carrie Sword and Katharine Hill

Issue: Mentoring can have a dramatic impact on a young person's life. Despite the increasing prevalence and importance of mentoring programs for youth in general, few of these programs, to date, intentionally include youth with disabilities.

Defining the Issue

Research has demonstrated the effectiveness of mentoring in helping youth develop skills, knowledge, and motivation to successfully transition from high school to adult life (Moccia, Schumaker, Hazel, Vernon, & Deshler, 1989; Rhodes, Grossman, & Resch, 2000). This transition is a major goal of youth with disabilities—one supported by both school systems and federal policy. Research on mentoring programs, however, reflects a lack of focus on specific applications of these programs for youth with disabilities. A review of 15 years of research on mentoring within organizations across the United States identifies demographics and risk factors for youth, but does not directly address disability as one of those factors (Sipe, 1999). A random national survey of 1,504 adult mentors identified several variables, such as academic performance, race, and socio-economic factors, however it does not directly address issues of disability (McLearn, Colasanto, Schoen, & Shapiro, 1999).

Youth with disabilities may be participating in mentoring programs, however, program managers and mentors may be unaware of how disabilities affect mentoring relationships. The reason for this lack of attention to disability issues is unclear.

What We Know

Types of Mentoring

Mentoring can take many different forms. It can occur both one-on-one and in small groups, with various combinations of mentor/mentee matches. Mentoring can take place through personal meetings, E-mail exchanges, telephone conversations, letters, or any other form of correspondence. Perhaps the most commonly recognized model is a face-to-face, one-on-one, community-based model, such as that associated with Big Brothers/Big Sisters. However, mentoring can also be done in groups, through schools, or through businesses or community agencies.

In community-based mentoring, volunteers from the community are matched with youth, with a general focus on building relationships and enhancing students' social activities. The majority of activities takes place outside of school and work environments. In school-based mentoring, adults are matched with children through their school classroom, and the bulk of activities take place during school hours, often with an academic or career-related focus (Sipe, 1999). In some other cases, employers run mentoring programs. For example, a group of employee-mentors may be matched with students in a specific classroom or school. It is also possible to have group mentoring, in which one mentor is matched with a small group of mentees.

A new model that is increasing in popularity is electronic mentoring (also called E-mentoring or telementoring). In this form of mentoring, the mentor and protege, or mentee, communicate via E-mail. E-mentoring is generally school-based and frequently focuses on career or academic achievement and improvement. Connecting to Success, developed at the University of Minnesota, is an example of an E-mentoring model for youth with disabilities.

Benefits of mentoring

In order to be truly effective, a mentoring program should benefit *all* participants— proteges, mentors, parents, community members, and others. Additionally, it is crucial that the mentoring program be well run, with training and support available for all participants. Research has documented that for mentors, some of the most common positive effects include:

- Increased self-esteem
- Feelings of accomplishment and creation of networks of volunteers
- Insight into childhood and adolescence
- Personal gain, such as increased patience, a sense of effectiveness, and acquiring new skills or knowledge (Rhodes et al., 2000)

Employers who engage in mentoring programs also experience benefits. Mentoring influences the organizational culture, sending a message that the company cares about people, values employees, and accepts diversity among both youth mentees and employees. Where youth with disabilities are mentored, the mentors and employers learn about the students' capabilities in spite of any disabilities they may have. This, in turn, prepares youth to be part of the future workforce, and gives employers a potential solution for labor market issues (Office of Disability Employment Policy, 2000). Additionally, employers benefit from a more motivated workforce, and employees report greater satisfaction in their work (The Connecticut Mentoring Project, 2002).

For proteges, some of the most commonly reported benefits of mentoring include:

- better attitudes toward school and future
- decreased likelihood of initiating drug or alcohol use
- greater feelings of academic competence
- improved academic performance
- more positive relationships with friends and family (Campbell-Whatley, 2001)

What Research Suggests About Mentoring

In addition to the earlier referenced studies, other research from recognized mentoring organizations confirms these benefits. This research reveals that mentoring can change the course of a young person's life, decrease substance abuse, and improve academic performance (Beier, Rosenfeld, Spitalny, Zansky, and Bontempo, 2000). For young people with disabilities, mentoring can impact many of the goals that are part of the transition process: succeeding academically, understanding the adult world, developing career awareness, accepting support

Accommodations: Making Mentoring More Accessible for Youth with Disabilities

Q: What are accommodations?
A: "Accommodations are changes in materials or procedures that provide access to instruction or assessments for students with disabilities. They are designed to enable students with disabilities to learn without the impediment of their disabilities, and to show their knowledge and skills rather than the effects of their disabilities" (Thurlow, 2002, p. 1). Accommodations are typically reported in students' IEPs.

Q: Why do youth with disabilities need accommodations to participate in mentoring?
A: Students may need accommodations, so that barriers to reading, writing, or verbal communication do not interfere with their ability to engage in the mentoring experience. Some youth may need the use of assistive technology to participate (e.g., a computer or other communication aids such as maps or written instructions). For youth with behavioral disabilities, the firm adherence to boundaries and limits within the mentoring relationship may facilitate a successful relationship and a growing sense of responsibility, whereas a lack of boundaries could lead to a failed relationship. Also, if a student's skill level in a specific area such as reading and writing is low, the mentor may need information about what to expect from the student and how to support the student's growth.

Q: How do I know which accommodations each student needs?
A: Accommodations should be individualized, based on the student's needs and skills. Two students who have the same disability may need different accommodations. One way to determine what students need would be to carefully review available student assessment information as well as asking them directly about their social skills, reading, writing and communication skills, and their independence level.

Q: What are some examples of accommodations within mentoring programs?
A: Examples include:

- Substitute materials with lower reading levels;
- Present information in multiple formats;
- Plan activities that are accessible to youth with physical disabilities; and
- Provide mentors with information, training, resources, and support relevant to the youth's specific disability.

while taking responsibility, communicating effectively, overcoming barriers, and developing social skills (Rhodes et al., 2000). When mentors are successfully employed, mentoring can provide connections for youth within the world of work, opening possibilities for employment. Thus, mentoring can be a dynamic catalyst for the achievement of transition goals.

Questions for Consideration

Why make provisions for including youth with disabilities in mentoring programs?

Because youth with disabilities are more likely to be in certain "at risk" categories, they especially stand to benefit from mentoring. In some cases, mentors, youth, and program managers may need guidance on how to facilitate the inclusion of youth with disabilities. Some of the potential issues include:

- Does the youth need accommodations in order to participate?
- Is the mentor prepared to foster development in a young person who may have significant academic limitations or barriers, social problems, boundary issues, or medical complexities?

- What disability-related information does the mentor need?
- How should mentoring programs handle the issue of whether or not to disclose the disability?
- How can mentors acknowledge the needs of youth with disabilities while encouraging excellence, and help them develop an orientation toward success?

These issues can be addressed through some simple practices and an inclusive attitude toward all youth.

What To Do Now

Establishing some basic provisions for inclusion of youth with disabilities in mentoring programs is a first step in making programs more accessible and in establishing mentoring opportunities for youth with disabilities. These provisions also add to the overall quality of mentoring experiences for all participants.

Some of these provisions include:

- Mentoring Web sites should be accessible to youth with various disabilities. For more about how to make your Web site accessible, please visit the World Wide Web Consortiums' Web Accessibility Initiative, at *http://www.w3c.org/WAI*.
- Promotional materials should make clear that youth with disabilities are welcome to participate. A statement inviting participation of youth from diverse backgrounds, including youth with disabilities, can clarify for them that they are truly welcome.
- In designing training for mentoring programs, individuals who run mentoring programs should consider issues such as boundaries, disclosure of disability-related information, mandatory reporting of abuse or neglect, responsibilities for each role within the program, and expectations of mentors and mentees.

An effective mentoring program will seek mentors with an understanding of the determination and perseverance needed to overcome barriers. Also, mentors should accept youth at their current level of development while holding high expectations for future achievement (Campbell-Whatley, 2001).

The following are some key concepts for creating mentoring programs that include youth with disabilities:

- Disabilities vary widely among youth, and what works for one young person may not work for another. For example, a student with a hearing impairment will have needs distinctly different from a student with a developmental disability. Establish a clear structure, be careful about handling the disclosure of disability-related information, and systematically use accommodations.
- A major goal of transition is for youth to understand and be able to discuss their disabilities. Mentors and mentoring program managers can support youth in this task by being open to discussion of disabilities in the mentoring relationship.
- Mentors need support and training. Program staff can support mentors by periodically communicating with them about the progress or challenges in the mentoring process. Periodic meetings that encourage discussion among mentors and program staff may provide some of the support mentors need. Follow-up training or refresher training may also benefit mentors as they become more deeply immersed in the mentoring process.
- Assure that the mentoring program is set up to support and facilitate regular, ongoing communication between mentors and proteges. This is particularly important for youth with disabilities. If a lapse of time occurs between contacts, participants can become frustrated and withdraw from the mentoring relationship, even if the lapse was due to a misunderstanding or miscommunication. Regular contact is important for youth who may have experienced a series of failed relationships or inconsistent adult guidance, as is the case for many youth with disabilities.
- Build into the mentoring program an adequate means of screening mentors, or other safeguards. Some

programs require complete background checks on all mentors. Other programs have safeguards built into the structure of activities (e.g., all activities occur at the school, all activities occur on-line, all activities are monitored, etc.)

- To address confidentiality and legal concerns, require parents to sign a consent form giving permission for the youth to participate in the program (Campbell-Whatley, 2001).

Guidelines for establishing mentoring programs are offered in Campbell-Whatley's *Mentoring students with mild disabilities: The nuts and bolts of program development* (2001), Sipe's *Mentoring adolescents: What have we learned?* (1999), and Saito and Roehlkepartain's *Variety of programs meet needs of mentors and mentees* (1992). [See references for citations.]

A Program That Addresses Inclusion of Youth With Disabilities

Connecting to Success is an electronic mentoring program of the National Center on Secondary Education and Transition at the University of Minnesota. The Connecting to Success framework includes training for mentors on working with youth with disabilities. Students are matched with mentors in a local business (or businesses) and communicate via E-mail for the course of the academic year. While the program is designed to address the specific needs of youth with disabilities, it can also be a valuable resource on the inclusion of youth with disabilities, their potential needs, and information for mentors on disability-related issues.

Connecting to Success staff members are available to assist staff from other mentoring programs who want to better serve youth with disabilities within their programs. For more information on Connecting to Success, visit the program's Web site, at: *http://www.ici.umn.edu/ementoring.*

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Resources

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